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# Town Meeting



*Bulletin* OF AMERICA'S  
TOWN MEETING OF THE AIR  
*Sponsored by* THE READER'S DIGEST

## Should Hollywood Make Movies Designed To Influence Public Opinion?

*Moderator, GEORGE V. DENNY, JR.*

### *Speakers*

CONSTANCE BENNETT  
ROBERT RISKIN

DONALD CRISP  
JAMES K. McGINNIS

*(See also page 12)*

COMING SEPTEMBER 20th

Topic to be announced later pending  
current events.

TUNE IN EVERY THURSDAY, AMERICAN BROADCASTING COMPANY—8:30 p.m., E.W.T.

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The account of the meeting reported in this Bulletin was transcribed from recordings made of the actual broadcast and represents the exact content of the meeting as nearly as such mechanism permits. The publishers and printer are not responsible for the statements of the speakers or the points of view presented.

### THE BROADCAST OF SEPTEMBER 6:

#### "Should Hollywood Make Movies Designed To Influence Public Opinion?"

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### THE BROADCAST OF SEPTEMBER 13:

#### "Should We Continue the Draft for at Least Two Years?"



### THE BROADCAST OF SEPTEMBER 20:

#### Topic to be announced later pending current events.

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# Town Meeting

Bulletin of America's Town Meeting of the Air



George V. Denny, Jr., Moderator

## Should Hollywood Make Movies Designed To Influence Public Opinion?

### Announcer:

*The Reader's Digest*, America's most widely read magazine welcomes you to another stirring session of America's Town Meeting, the program that gives you both sides of issues affecting your life and mine. America's Town Meeting, as produced by Town Hall, New York.

Tonight, here at the Philharmonic Auditorium in Los Angeles, California, four authorities clash over an issue that may influence the thinking of millions throughout the country.

Now to open this important session, *The Reader's Digest* brings you the president of Town Hall, and founder and moderator of America's Town Meeting, Mr. George V. Denny, Jr. Mr. Denny. (*Applause.*)

### Moderator Denny:

Good evening, neighbors. I see by the papers that 95,000,000

people witness Hollywood productions every week. That's a lot of people. Charges and counter-charges have been made that this world's greatest entertainment medium is being used for propaganda purposes. What do you think?

Well, we're avoiding the use of the word propaganda tonight and going directly to the heart of the controversy as we understand it with this question, "Should Hollywood Make Pictures Designed to Influence Public Opinion?"

We're not concerned here this evening with the so-called documentary films, nor are we concerned with the influence on current fashions of a screen star's hairdo or the clothes she wears.

We are concerned primarily with the question of whether feature pictures should attempt to influence public opinion in the realm of ideas—politically, economically,

or socially. In a world teeming with controversial questions, should, or can, Hollywood avoid dealing with these questions? If Hollywood producers do deal with them, how should they be treated?

In later meetings, we'll discuss the problems of the other two great media of communication—the press and radio. But tonight, it's Hollywood. Our speakers are Constance Bennett, lovely star of screen and radio, now a producer in her own right; Robert Riskin, writer and producer; Donald Crisp, distinguished star of scores of films; and James K. McGinnis, executive of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

In our audience are many stars and distinguished figures in the Nation's film capital, who may participate in our question period a little later. But to get our argument under way tonight, let's hear first from the man who has served recently as the Director of the Overseas Bureau of the OWI; who's so well remembered as the writer of the Academy Award winner, "It Happened One Night;" is producer of "Meet John Doe," and who's now at work on a picture to be called "The Magic City," I give you Robert Riskin. Mr. Riskin. (*Applause.*)

**Mr. Riskin:**

When you blow your nose, you are influencing public opinion. A foreigner, seeing an American on the screen blow his nose, can find it either enchanting or repugnant.

At that instant, there might be born a lasting opinion of all Americans.

When a rural community is presented on the screen with all its charm and tranquility, it might stir in the heart of the city dweller, a nostalgia for the dear little town he left long ago and perhaps alter the course of his life. When a suburbanite sits in wonder at the gaiety and glamor of a metropolitan city, sees the young hero with beautiful and brilliant women falling at his feet, he might find his quiet existence suddenly inadequate and, perhaps, be impelled to leave home and Ma.

The motion picture being visual as well as articulate, and because it is fashioned to have an impact on the emotions, is a volatile medium. The speech and manners of millions of movie-goers, as well as their moral concepts, are constantly undergoing changes as a direct result of the pictures they see, and not necessarily those that set out to achieve this end.

All right, what about those that are designed to influence public opinion? What are the impulses that might provoke the writer, director, or producer to embark on the sort of project our opponents may consider undesirable?

On the serious side, he may wish to move his audience toward a higher, spiritual outlook, a more meticulous standard of morals, or toward an improvement in his so-

cial or economical life. On the lighter side, he may wish to spread the idea that babies bring happiness to the home, that dog is man's best friend, or that virtue pays and crime doesn't.

Now which of these, or a score of other themes in common usage, significant or frivolous, would our opponents banish from the screen? Or would they banish all of them, for they are all designed to reach into the mind of the public? Let me ask this—when virtue triumphs and evil is frustrated in the strictest accordance with the Hayes code, is that not definitely designed? Is not that a sinister plot to influence the poor, unsuspecting public to the ways of righteousness?

It is so much of a plot, so carefully designed, that failure to adhere to the code might mean no distribution of your picture.

All effective dramatic films must start out with an idea—not a plot idea, but a viewpoint. Without it you have no structure, no opportunity for character development, no conflict, no third act, and the chances are, no audience.

Would our opponents say to the writer, "We do not consider it your function to influence thought so let's not have any ideas."

How is it possible for a dramatist to create conflict, if conflict of ideas is denied him? Take that from the writer and you render him sterile. Impose that sort of

limitation on the film writer and be prepared for a new low in Hollywood output.

Now what about the basic democratic principle of free expression? Aren't we threatening its very existence when we suggest that the screen be muzzled? Daily, books, magazines, and newspapers are published, all having content designed to influence public opinion. Yet we would consider it unthinkable to have a debate on whether or not the press ought to be free.

Why, then, is the screen singled out for such conjectures? It is for the protection of the public. I am confident the movie-goers of the country would be the first to roar their disapproval if they found their film diet limited to musical comedies and other themeless dishes.

There's a school of argument which contends that the screen is intended only for what they call entertainment. This school apparently assumes that ideas are not entertaining. The public refutes this.

The public has clearly manifested its desire for serious films by supporting the large number produced every year—pictures which they obviously find most entertaining.

Those who fret that the screen might be filled with too many films on highly controversial subjects are also stewing needlessly. The producer is a businessman.

Films are costly. He cannot afford to speculate too often with pictures which might antagonize his audience or any portion thereof. The very economic structure of the industry requires that, if he is to survive, his product must reach the largest of audiences and this can only be done if his theme is universally acceptable.

I have just concluded three years with the Government. One of my functions was the utilization of American motion pictures for purposes of creating good will. It must be remembered that in many, many areas throughout the world, the impression of America and its people is derived from our films and from no other source. This places an added responsibility on Hollywood to turn out a product praiseworthy and thought provoking.

In the liberated countries, wherever I travelled I encountered avid curiosity about the pictures Hollywood had made during the years of enemy occupation. This curiosity was directed, not toward the so-called escapist films, but primarily to those having thematic substance. These are the pictures which stimulate respect and admiration for the craftsmanship, intellect, and serious-mindedness of the American people.

Hollywood's own self-regulation through the Hayes office and the censorship in some states already impose on such limitations as to

make its output too often ineffectual and lifeless.

Let's not shackle the victim any more. Let's ask rather that more thoughtful, more vital, more imaginative films be turned out and that nose blowing be made more enchanting and less repugnant to our foreign friends. (*Applause.*)

#### **Moderator Denny:**

Thank you, Mr. Riskin. One of the earliest and most distinguished resident of this film capital is Donald Crisp, also a winner of an Oscar for his work in "How Green Was My Valley." Millions of Americans have heard him interpret brilliantly scores upon scores of characterizations whose lines were written for him. But tonight he speaks his own mind on a question about which he has deep convictions. Mr. Donald Crisp. (*Applause.*)

#### **Mr. Crisp:**

When Hitler made movies to influence public opinion, we called it pernicious propaganda. When the beauteous Constance Bennett and the brilliant Bob Riskin urge us to make movies to influence public opinion, they call it social leadership.

It reminds me of the story of two ladies chatting on the street corner. One of them espied a child approaching and said, "Did you ever see a human being with such monstrous ears?" The other lady explained that the boy was

her nephew. Whereupon the woman tactfully said, "On him they look good." (*Laughter.*)

Actually, influencing public opinion is still propaganda and propaganda has no place on a motion-picture screen unless it is labeled as such. (*Applause.*)

Instructional and documentary films are useful but must be so designated and not foisted on an unsuspecting audience.

When John Smith decides to go to a picture show for entertainment, he is entitled to get just that and not a sociological thesis more or less disguised. If he wants to read a book on economics or go to an educational institution after his day's work, that's his privilege, but if he wants entertainment and pays his money to get it, that's what he should find on the screen.

If you pay 50 cents for a can labeled "peas" and find your can full of spinach when you open it, with a note from the canner that he believes spinach is better for you (*applause and laughter*) will you be happy about it? I doubt it.

It all boils down to whether we believe the American people can decide what they like and want, or whether the few folks who happen to make pictures in Hollywood should decide for all of us. (*Applause.*) I think the customers can do their own deciding.

Wendell Willkie—in my humble opinion, one of our greatest men—

stated that America's greatest international asset, the gigantic reservoir of good will toward the United States among the peoples of the world, was largely the creation of Hollywood's movies. These were made basically almost entirely for entertainment. Yet they made the American way of life universally desired without any attempt to propagandize that way of life. Let's not change a policy which has worked so well in practice. (*Applause.*)

Eleven million men and women have fought and forty million more have worked hard as civilians to defend the right to the pursuit of happiness guaranteed to us by the Founders of this Republic, and to ensure a similar right to all the peoples of the earth. To hundreds of millions of men, women, and children happiness can be found in the picture theater. Let them find it untrammeled by propaganda.

In time of war, we all gave up many precious rights, including this one. It was fitting that when we see Lana Turner or Betty Grable, we should also be fed a documentary film on the war and a short urging us to save waste fats. That was Uncle Sam's way of arming us, hardening us, bolstering our morale and showing us what a tough fight we had on our hands. But that necessity no longer exists. We want to think for ourselves now.

Bob Hope makes me laugh my head off. Greer Garson can stir me emotionally, and I can still enjoy a lingering close-up of Esther Williams in a bathing suit. But that doesn't mean that I want them or others just as effective in their own spheres to do my political or economic thinking for me. And I think the great majority feels that way. It's the democratic way. (*Applause.*)

There's another great danger in Hollywood making pictures to influence public opinion—the economic factor of the foreign market, which will soon again become an important item in Hollywood's revenue. Before the war, it was about 70 per cent of the net profit and every producer will cater to it. That means governmental control to limit or direct our preaching abroad which means indirect censorship. We already have too much of that.

As we did before the war, we never heard of social significance. We'll stay clear of governmental control and will again get the major share of the international film business. The world is weary of propaganda and biased messages. That way Fascism lies.

Keep the theater a house of illusion. Keep the screen free of alleged messages from any group of self-constituted leaders. When we go to the movies, let's have fun. Let's remain free to think for ourselves, and, Bob, let's sell the

world some other American practice outside of nose blowing. The fundamental decencies of life are not propaganda. They are like the air we breathe—free, universal, and basic. (*Applause.*)

#### **Moderator Denny:**

Thank you, Donald Crisp. Here's another member of your profession who has equally deep convictions on the other side of tonight's topic, "Should Hollywood Make Pictures Designed To Influence Public Opinion?" The lovely star of screen and radio—in fact, she has her own show on this network—who has just made her initial bow as a producer of the picture called "Paris Underground"—Miss Constance Bennett. (*Applause.*)

#### **Miss Bennett:**

I don't quite understand Mr. Crisp when he says the world is weary of propaganda and biased messages—let's keep the theater a house of illusion. I contend that the theater is and always has been a house of illusion.

A play or a picture isn't real. The trick is for the actors to make it appear real. That's good acting and it's also illusion.

Why must every story except the musical or phantasy be considered propaganda? Why are so many people thinking of musicals and comedies as the only kind of a picture to be placed in the escapist class?

I maintain that any picture that can lift you out of your own life, absorb your interest for the length of time you are in the theater, is an escapist picture and therefore entertaining, whether it be comedy, drama, truth, or fiction.

For me to try to tell you that movies don't influence the people of this world would be very foolish. By the same token, for me to tell you that they are designed for that particular purpose would also be foolish. Pictures are designed to entertain. If I go to a theater, cry throughout the entire picture and leave with my eyes red and swollen, my nose looking like somebody's forgotten headlight, who is to say I haven't enjoyed myself and been entertained. (*Applause.*)

Say what you will, the motion picture carefully produced and skillfully presented, offers not only entertainment, but vast contributions to learning and understanding as well. It can bring vicarious experience from all over the world into the home.

I think it's ridiculous for us to even think we can present a picture, regardless of its scenes, without somewhere, someone, taking it for the gospel truth. But that doesn't mean we should underestimate the I. Q. of our movie-going public. Instead, we should try to give them true pictures of life everywhere. In this way our

Nation can continue to grow. (*Applause.*)

Right now we know that we must reach out across the broad expanse of water to countries far beyond our scope. We know we must be a friendly people. We know we must understand our enemies. But to know and understand a nation means we must know their customs, their way of life. We must know how they live, how they work, and how they play.

This can be done over a period of years through the medium of movies and comedy and drama, as well as in documentary films and newsreels. In other words—seeing is believing.

It's an accepted fact that the sense of sight is a better avenue for the acquirement of knowledge than our other senses. For example, we perhaps didn't fully realize the horrors and sacrifices our men made in this war. We didn't fully realize, that is, until we were helped by visualizing through such pictures as "Wake Island," "Guadalcanal Diary," "Destination Tokyo." "So Proudly We Hail" displayed the courage and bravery of our American women.

Mr. Crisp points out that he enjoys watching Greer Garson on the screen. He says Miss Garson stirs his emotions. In the picture "Mrs. Miniver," Miss Garson not only stirred our emotions, but helped to show us the true spirit of the

British civilians in the fall of Dunkirk. (*Applause.*)

Don't tell us you contend, Mr. Crisp, that pictures such as the ones I've just mentioned should be left undone because we might possibly gain something more than just entertainment out of them. We couldn't go to Europe or to the Pacific, but we could, through the films, learn of the hardships and tortures of war.

Some people will say that we would be better off if we didn't know all they went through. Would we? We can't close our eyes to the evils of the world. We can't understand the world and all that's going on in it unless we know what's happening.

I hope sincerely that the movies will give us a chance to learn more about the world. If we're being entertained and still being given "food for thought" is that bad? To a lot of men and women who haven't had the chance for a formal education, this will mean the difference between ignorance and sensible thinking.

I'm heartily in accord with Mr. Riskin. I don't believe producers, or writers, or artists should be stifled and allowed to present only one pattern of picture. I think they should develop all phases.

Mr. Denny appoints out that approximately 95,000,000 people are said to attend the cinema weekly. If through entertainment 95,000,000 of our people can better know

and understand the inner workings of other countries, and if, by the same token, people in foreign lands can learn about us, can get a true picture of us—and mind you, I said a true picture—through the motion-picture industry, I think we should use that medium and every medium at our disposal to further international relations.

If through entertainment we are able to further the peace, isn't that the thing to do?

We are working together with but one thought in mind—to build a lasting peace, a peace that will live and grow and continue through the years. This will be difficult to accomplish if we lose one of our most principal basic needs—the right of free expression. (*Applause.*)

#### Moderator Denny:

Thank you, Constance Bennett. I assure you all that she's just as lovely as her charming voice. Now, you must face the ire of a fellow producer, though, Miss Bennett, who sides strongly with Mr. Crisp—Mr. James K. McGinnis, first a writer, then a producer, and now an executive of the world's largest studio, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, and executive chairman of the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, whose newest picture soon to be released is John Ford's "They Were Expendable." Mr. McGinnis. (*Applause.*)

**Mr. McGinnis:**

All four of us agree that motion pictures made in Hollywood do influence public opinion. They have to, if they are to be effective. There never was a scene shot, or a sentence written that did not in some measure influence opinion favorably or adversely.

Youngsters learning typewriting use a standard sentence for practice. "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog." Even that simple sentence forms opinion, at least about one dog. It says definitely that he is lazy.

Motion pictures have been made in Hollywood for thirty years. Almost uniformly they have tried to be entertaining. Some succeeded, some failed. But the measure of success in those thirty years has been so far greater than the percentage of failure that Hollywood has become the amusement center of the world. All civilization looks to Hollywood to provide its chief, and, in many cases, its only form of entertainment and escape. This has come about because Hollywood and the motion-picture industry have always upheld in their pictures the basic principles of morality which form our western civilization.

These principles are the religious and moral concepts of the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount. Pictures have always been on the side of good against evil. We are all agreed on

that. We are also agreed that this is as it should be.

Then why are we debating the question, "Should Hollywood Make Pictures Designed To Influence Public Opinion?

Only because there is agitation now which would have Hollywood try to influence public opinion politically. Something new has been added, and that something is political.

Politics are not the function of motion pictures, and it should never be allowed to become their function. (*Applause.*) The screen is no place for the conduct of a political debate. Connie, you advocate presenting both sides of a question in motion pictures, but I tell you the very nature of the medium forbids this. The writer cannot write effectively unless he takes one side.

The very essence of drama is the creation of a rooting interest. In all your successful pictures, Connie, that rooting interest was the heroine, the character you played. Charming, lovely, talented as you are, you still want your share of the good lines before you accept a role. You want to be the rooting interest. (*Applause.*)

What is to be the rooting interest in a picture designed to influence the political opinion of the public — Democratic, Republican, Communist, Fascist. Who is to decide which and what?

## THE SPEAKERS' COLUMN

**CONSTANCE BENNETT** — The daughter of Richard Bennett of stage fame, Miss Bennett is a member of a well known family of the theater. She was born in New York City in 1905 and received her formal education in several private schools —Miss Chandor's in New York, Mrs. Merrill's in Mamaroneck, and Mme. Balsan's in Paris. Miss Bennett began her film career in 1924 in "Cynthia." Since then, with the exception of four years, she has appeared in many pictures and in many stage plays.

**ROBERT RISKIN** — Former writing partner of Frank Capra, Robert Riskin is one of Hollywood's highest paid and most successful scenarists. With Mr. Capra he produced "Meet Mr. Doe" and many other hits in-

cluding "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington," "You Can't Take It With You," and "It Happened One Night."

During the war, Mr. Riskin has been associated with the Office of War Information.

**DONALD CRISP** — One of Hollywood's best character actors, Donald Crisp was the winner of an Academy Award in 1942 for his part in the outstanding picture of 1941, "How Green Was My Valley."

**JAMES K. McGINNIS** — Writer and producer, Mr. McGinnis is now an executive of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. He is also executive chairman of the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals.

Who is to decide what actress shall become the protagonist of what ideology? Cast Clark Gable or Gary Cooper as the protagonist, you will be assured of an audience of from forty to eighty million people for some writer's ideas.

With an unknown actor, the very same ideology will reach two million people instead of from forty to eighty million. The writer of the ideology, on his own merits, might not command a reading public of ten thousand.

Who is to determine which new ideology is important enough to have Gable or Cooper as its advocate? Or which is so unimportant as to get the unknown actor?

The man who makes this decision, in the last analysis, will control public opinion of motion-pictures' venture into the field of politics. No man or group of men should be entrusted with this power. (*Applause.*)

Even if we agreed that somebody should have this power of decision, the very physical processes of making motion pictures are so long drawn out, that they forbid the use of feature length films, which are what Hollywood makes, as measures of debate.

If a man writes an editorial in the newspaper, he can be answered and his arguments refuted within 48 hours. If he advocates some political ideology over the radio,

he can be answered and refuted in even less time. The arguments *against* can be given to the public while the arguments *for* are still fresh in its mind. But present the advocacy of any new political experiment on the screen, and the presentation of the answer will be 15 months away—one year and three months.

I am not exaggerating the time that must elapse. It takes at least six months to prepare a script for a feature-length picture. It requires six months more to shoot it, to put it through mechanical processes of cutting, scoring, dubbing, and the making of release prints. It then takes three months longer to distribute those prints to the various exchanges and theaters, so that 15 months I mentioned is a conservative estimate of the time between the formulation of an idea and its presentation to the public on the screens of the world.

Let us stay away from the shifting quicksands of the changing ideas of the world of politics. Hollywood has a far greater mission than advocating this political experiment or that economic theory.

We are the makers of music. We are the weavers of dreams. In a world torn and battered after twelve years of continued horror, our function should be one of healing, not of creating further sores.

Humanity has been badgered and beaten too long by self-ap-

pointed prophets, teachers, and doers of what they call good. Mankind is starved for laughter, for joy, for beauty, for escape from tragedy. Motion pictures can supply these great balms for the spirit. Hollywood can give hope that the simple joys of peace shall flourish again.

On the screens of the world Hollywood can help humanity. Let us not preach at our fellows but let us give them back the boon they have been so long denied. Let us do our part to restore laughter to the world. (*Applause.*)

#### **Moderator Denny:**

Thank you, Mr. McGinnis. Now Miss Bennett, we want you and Mr. McGinnis and Mr. Riskin and Mr. Crisp to join me up here around the microphone. Mr. Riskin, we haven't heard from you for a long time. How about starting this discussion here?

**Mr. Riskin:** Well, I'd like to address a question to Mr. Crisp. Mr. Crisp, you have achieved a very high place in films for your histrionic talents. In fact, you have demonstrated your skill tonight by the sinister way in which you rolled your tongue around the word "propaganda." A few years ago, I believe you won an Academy Award for your fine performance in "How Green Was My Valley."

Now this is what I would like to ask. First, do you think you would have had full sway for your artistry and won this high honor

if your part did not have profundity and significance?

Secondly, would you say that that picture should not have been made because it dealt with a social problem—in this instance, the depressed living conditions of the Welsh miner?

**Mr. Denny:** That comes very close to being a personal question. But fire away, this is a personal discussion.

**Mr. Crisp:** Well, Mr. Riskin, that was from a novel—a book that was published—and, therefore, that work should go out. It was not the idea of any one Hollywood writer.

**Mr. Riskin:** I don't see that that's the point in question at all, as to where the source of the material is. We are discussing as to whether Hollywood should make pictures designed to influence public opinion. We are not discussing the point as to where the source of the material is.

**Mr. Crisp:** I don't see how the old miner in "How Green Was My Valley" would influence public opinion. He must portray the part. That brings me in as an actor. He must portray that part faithfully to you to carry out the ideas of the author. Whatever he teaches, that is the idea of the author, but I am saying and still maintain propaganda has no place on the screen. (*Applause.*)

**Miss Bennett:** Then, Mr. Crisp, you think that "How Green Was

My Valley" should not have been made since that is—if you want to use the word—propaganda. Nevertheless, I don't think it's propaganda, but it did point out the difficulties of the Welsh miner. It had a message, therefore.

**Mr. Denny:** Mr. McGinnis wants to get in on this. Mr. McGinnis.

**Mr. McGinnis:** "How Green Was My Valley" was an attack on poverty and I think we can agree that the abolition of poverty is neither a political nor a controversial issue. (*Applause.*)

**Mr. Riskin:** The elimination of poverty is certainly a controversial and a political issue when that elimination cannot be accomplished by the people who need it most. (*Applause.*)

**Mr. Denny:** Mr. Crisp, do you want to get in on this now?

**Mr. Crisp:** I didn't quite get the question from Mr. Riskin, but to go back to the—we can't keep talking about "How Green Was My Valley," but Miss Bennett made the remark that perhaps I would say the film should never have been made. Anything that's entertaining, but not forced upon you—that you are allowed to form your own opinion of your entertainment—that is what I am for and will remain that way.

**Mr. Denny:** Mr. Riskin.

**Mr. Riskin:** I don't like the idea of monopolizing the microphone but Mr. Crisp speaks of the public having a right to choose its own

entertainment—the public has that right. That is indicated by the fact that one picture grosses nothing and another picture grosses ten million. The public constantly manifests its interest and its desire in specific pictures, which it considers entertaining, by a choice. They shop for their pictures.

**Mr. Crisp:** I ask you Mr. Riskin, how will the public have the choice of what they are going to be and see and hear and pay for, if any writer will write it their way. You said why should we restrict films and why further censor them? I would like to say for the same reason we have doors on our bathrooms. We like it that way.

**Mr. McGinnis:** Unfortunately, being an executive, Mr. Riskin—Miss Bennett, you will soon get this way—I am interested in the box-office returns.

**Miss Bennett:** What do you mean soon, Mr. McGinnis?

**Mr. McGinnis:** Immediately, then. If you want to check on the five box-office pictures—the top grosses—of the last year, you will find that there isn't a single political notion, a single piece of ideology in any one of the five starting with "Going My Way," "Meet Me in St. Louis," "Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo," "God Is My Co-Pilot," "Song of Bernadette"—you can go on for ten or fifteen pictures and you will not find one picture with a note of propaganda

in it among those that the public liked. (*Applause.*)

**Mr. Riskin:** That's a very interesting statement, Mr. McGinnis, except that I have here the grosses of the 1945 issue of *Box Office Digest*, a trade journal, which lists among the ten top grossing pictures "Going My Way," "Wilson," "Since You Went Away," "Song of Bernadette," "The Story of Dr. Wassel," and "Winged Victory." Six out of the ten top grossing pictures were among those with theme preaching, even though that preaching may be one which may lead you to a better and a finer religious faith.

All these pictures are capable of profoundly influencing public thought and behavior. Now the public very definitely manifested its desire and interest in these motion pictures by supporting them.

**Mr. Denny:** Thank you, Mr. Riskin. It seems to me you have listed the same pictures almost, but it's a question of interpretation as to whether they influence public opinion or not. We've come to the point now where we must pause briefly for station identification.

**Announcer:** You are listening to America's Town Meeting, the program that gives both sides of questions vitally important to you, sponsored by the most widely read of all magazines, *The Reader's Digest*. Tonight, Actress Constance Bennett, Actor Donald Crisp, and Movie Producers Robert Riskin

and James K. McGinnis are clashing over the topic, "Should Hollywood Make Movies Designed To Influence Public Opinion?"

For a complete copy of this discussion, including the question

period immediately following, send for the Town Meeting Bulletin. Just write to Town Hall, New York 18, New York, and enclose 10 cents to cover the cost of printing and mailing.

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## QUESTIONS, PLEASE!

*Mr. Denny:* Now we're ready for the questions from this representative Los Angeles and Hollywood audience. I see a number of our old friends here—a couple of them who have been on Town Meeting. I'm going to introduce them to you first. Perhaps they have questions. If not, we'll pass around until they are ready for a question. Where's the man with the hand mike here. I want to turn the spotlight right now on a man who was just on our program, down at Santa Ana not long ago, who is out here with his young son who is two and a half years old today. Our old friend, Jackie Coogan. Jackie. (*Applause.*)

*Mr. Coogan:* Thank you very much.

*Mr. Denny:* Have you got a question for us, Jack?

*Mr. Coogan:* Why, yes, Mr. Denny. I have a question for Mr. Riskin.

*Mr. Denny:* Jackie's in civilian clothes. Mr. Riskin, will you step up for this question.

*Mr. Coogan:* Mr. Riskin, I'd like to ask you this. Wouldn't Holly-

wood's entry into the political field invite government control over the entire Hollywood product including entertainment films?

*Mr. Riskin:* I don't quite understand what you mean when you say if Hollywood entered into the political scene or field because Hollywood has been in the political field ever since they made the first motion picture. Every picture that has to do or concerns itself with the interests of the people whether it's social, or whether it's an economic, or whether it's a religious subject is definitely in a field of influencing public opinion. This discussion has narrowed itself down to a discussion as to whether politics, as such, should be included in Hollywood motion pictures.

*Mr. Coogan:* Well, we're merely substituting politics there for propaganda. (*Laughter.*)

*Mr. Riskin:* Well, you've taken me from the frying pan into the fire.

*Mr. Coogan:* Well, what I mean, Mr. Riskin, was don't you think governmental control will grow out of the fact that we will be

projecting certain ideas, maybe, of a minority, and sometimes the majority, to the people of the United States through the medium of motion pictures. Won't it bring in government control?

*Mr. Riskin:* If federal control has not come in in the past, it certainly won't come in in the future. I'm not concerned about the type or the extremes to which the motion-picture industry might go that might bring about censorship or control, because we must never forget that the motion-picture studios are gigantic organizations controlled by Wall Street bankers, held by stockholders throughout the world, and the executives are very conservative industrialists. There is very, very little danger that the subjects that will be treated in the future will ever be overwhelmingly dangerous to a way of life.

*Mr. Denny:* Thank you, Mr. Riskin. Now, I see another lovely lady who has been on our program—who was on our program the last time we were in Los Angeles right here in this hall. Miss Irene Dunne. (*Applause.*) Miss Dunne, have you a question for us?

*Miss Dunne:* My question is for Mr. Crisp. Mr. Crisp has given many inspired performances and I would like to ask him if from today on he felt that we were making pictures purely to entertain and for the young people of Amer-

ica—never trying to influence them by manner or means—wouldn't he feel that our industry would stop growing? I don't know, is that clear?

*Mr. Crisp:* Well, I didn't quite get it. Will you—

*Miss Dunne:* Well, I'll tell you. Maybe I can explain. The other day making a little speech here in town—this is our Accident Prevention Week. Children, young people will not go to see films where you are telling them about preventing accidents, but if you give it to them through entertainment, they will sit and enjoy it and benefit by it.

*Mr. Crisp:* That's very true, Miss Dunne. As we know, the children are terrifically influenced by the films they see. I would like to ask the same idea of was it the special standard of morals that had us make "Dillinger." It wasn't the usual standard. It was the glorification of a ganster, his guns, and his killings. It isn't entertainment. It isn't a picture of America that we want them to judge us by. But that is something we never think of—or very few. Let's always think of the children. If you're going to have one man's ideas, he can tell the children to go and pick pockets as long as that's his idea. That should never be. (*Applause.*)

*Mr. Denny:* Thank you, Mr. Crisp. Mr. Riskin wants in on it. Mr. Riskin.

*Mr. Riskin:* About the subject of "Dillinger" and gangster pictures, the *Parents' Magazine*, speaking for 7 million club women throughout the country, characterized this picture as a "crime doesn't pay" preaching. Now, I'm not speaking for the picture. I haven't seen it. Quite obviously there's been a great deal of clamor in dissent. In any event, whether we agree or not, if we should advocate the censorship of this type of film or any other type of film, consistency must demand that we also advocate censorship of the sensational treatment of crimes in our family newspapers and censorship of all crime and horror programs on the air.

*Mr. Denny:* Ah, now he's started after the air—radio and the press. We're going to do that soon, Mr. Riskin. Now, I'll take the question from the gentleman there in the back of the hall.

*Man:* Mr. McGinnis. Why allow powerful industrial and religious organizations to force the cutting or withdrawal of films possibly inimical to those interests?

*Mr. McGinnis:* I don't know of any interests which should force the cutting or withdrawal of any film with which I have ever been connected or have ever known about.

*Mr. Denny:* All right, anybody else care to tackle that here? The question was, have big industrial or financial interests ever forced the cutting of pictures or the with-

drawing of pictures inimical to their self-interest? All right, they all say no. How about the question for gentleman number three there? Yes?

*Man:* Insofar as Hollywood, in spite of the Hayes code, very often offends against morality, how can Hollywood producers be safely entrusted to plot the Nation's political courses?

*Mr. Denny:* He says how can Hollywood producers safely be trusted to plot the political course of the people in view of the nature of Hollywood producers, as I gather it—the first part of it.

*Man:* In view of their offenses against decency and morality.

*Mr. Denny:* Oh, in view of their offenses against decency and morality. Oh, that's a loaded question. But go ahead. (*Laughter.*) You should have left the first part out anyway.

*Miss Bennett:* I don't think that the Hollywood producers are entrusted with the political thinking. I believe the public is entrusted with it. I believe the public proves that it is entrusted with it by the pictures they go to see. (*Applause.*)

*Mr. Denny:* All right. Thank you. The gentleman back there. Yes?

*Man:* Mr. Riskin. In this sense, I believe that influence means political influence. Mr. Riskin, do you think Hollywood should make a picture which would influence

public opinion in favor of communism for America? (*Applause.*)

*Mr. Denny:* There it is. It's reared its ugly head.

*Mr. Riskin:* No, I don't think that Hollywood should make a picture projecting communism or fascism, or one about the love life of a bedbug. (*Laughter.*) The only point that I make is that the screen should be free as other media of communication are free. (*Applause.*)

*Mr. Denny:* Thank you. Now, there's a lovely lady sitting right beside Miss Irene Dunne, with her husband beside her. Now, you men be careful. It's Miss Loretta Young. (*Applause.*) Miss Young, have you a question?

*Miss Young:* Thank you, Mr. Denny. I'd like Mr. McGinnis. Mr. McGinnis, I'm not going to put you on the spot. I'm a little confused as to just what the issue was. Is this to decide whether Hollywood is to design pictures to influence the public politically, or in just emotional or love issues or whatever else pictures are made up of?

*Mr. McGinnis:* That is going to take a minute or two to answer, Loretta, because—

*Miss Young:* That's all right, Mr. McGinnis—

*Mr. McGinnis:* I can only answer the question as I understand what the debate is about. I really believe the question is a straddle. (*Laughter.*) The question is,

"Should Hollywood Make Motion Pictures Designed To Influence Public Opinion," and Hollywood can't make any other kind of motion pictures. (*Applause.*)

*Mr. Denny:* Well, Mr.—

*Mr. McGinnis:* But if you will just let me finish.

*Mr. Denny:* Go ahead.

*Mr. McGinnis:* But if we are to try to influence public opinion in the fields where motion pictures can't deal, in the fields that are controversial and debatable, then I think we should, in self-protection, stay away from those fields. (*Applause.*)

*Miss Young:* Jim, then who would you suggest could make those pictures?

*Mr. McGinnis:* What pictures?

*Miss Young:* Those that we are not allowed to touch? Documentary films, in other words.

*Mr. Denny:* In the field of political ideas?

*Mr. McGinnis:* I hope the Republican and Democratic parties, or any other interested political party. (*Laughter.*)

*Miss Young:* Thank you, Jim.

*Mr. Denny:* In defense of the title, Mr. McGinnis, I've got to say that, as I indicated at the opening of our program, we are dealing, primarily, with this question in the realm of ideas, politically, economically, and socially. Now, we take a question from the young man right here in the aisle. Yes?

*Man:* To Mr. Donald Crisp. Mr. Crisp, why not educate public opinion through motion pictures to help eliminate prejudice and discrimination? (*Applause.*)

*Mr. Crisp:* I don't know anything that could be more wonderful. But I do want to say this, that many years ago I worked in a film called the "Birth of a Nation" and in the fourth week of that film's showing, three men met their death because that film was shown and no man has the right to put that propaganda before the American public that will slay another man. (*Applause.*)

*Mr. Denny:* Mr. Riskin.

*Mr. Riskin:* Because of ignorance, three people got killed at a showing of "The Birth of a Nation." Because of ignorance, twenty million people died in the last war. (*Shouts and applause.*)

*Mr. Denny:* Mr. Crisp?

*Mr. Crisp:* But our boys went out and remedied the war. You cannot remedy what a Hollywood producer puts on the screen that causes men to be killed through racial intolerance. (*Applause.*)

*Mr. Denny:* Mr. McGinnis has a comment there. Yes?

*Mr. McGinnis:* Fortunately, "The Birth of a Nation" was made in the early days of motion pictures and before people responsible for the making of motion pictures had had sufficient contact with public reaction to realize what a danger-

ous and yet what a powerful instrument was in their possession.

I call to your attention the fact that during many years past, the best preachments of tolerance and of understanding and of racial tolerance, one man to the other, have been presented in motion pictures as a part of the entertainment. I bring to mind one picture that happens to have been made by my own studio, "Boys' Town," in which there were in that school—run by a Catholic Priest—Jews, Protestants, and colored men. (*Applause.*)

*Mr. Denny:* Thank you, very much, Mr. McGinnis. Now there's a question right here on the aisle.

*Man:* The question is addressed to Miss Bennett. I'm a little confused. Do you advocate a change in picture making, or should we continue making them as we have for these many years?

*Miss Bennett:* I advocate continuing making them as we have these many years. (*Applause.*)

*Mr. Denny:* All right. Thank you. I see Mrs. Arthur Berg, of the Southern California Opera Guild, there with a question. Mrs. Berg.

*Mrs. Berg:* Mr. McGinnis. Why couldn't the films under discussion be made presenting both sides of the question in the same manner as Town Meeting presents both sides on the air?

*Mr. Denny:* I assure you I didn't plant that question. (*Laughter.*)

*Mr. McGinnis:* I know. There is only one form of dramatic writing in which you can present both sides of the same question—it is satire. George Kaufman well defines satire as the thing that closes Saturday night. (*Laughter.*)

*Mr. Denny:* Mr. Riskin wants to answer that. Yes?

*Mr. Riskin:* This falls in line with a statement that Mr. McGinnis made earlier in which he said that writers cannot take two sides. It is true that a writer must favor one side of an issue, but 650 writers can have 650 views. If you can achieve the impossible and get unanimity of thought and purpose on the part of all the bankers who control the motion-picture industry, all the executives, all the producers, all the directors, and writers in the film industry, then perhaps you might have some cause for worry over the type of film that's going to be made. (*Applause.*)

*Mr. Denny:* Mr. McGinnis, yes?

*Mr. McGinnis:* My contention is, not that 650 writers can write one moving picture, although I have seen a fair proportion of them try it (*laughter*), but that the presentation of a thought in any one picture, of the idea that Mr. Riskin says is fundamental in a picture for the concept must present, must load, the issue in favor of one side. I have tried to point out that if you want to answer that it will take you 15 months to get the re-

buttal to the screen. So I do not believe we have a medium for debate.

*Mr. Denny:* All right. Mr. Riskin.

*Mr. Riskin:* I quite agree with Mr. McGinnis, but the point that I was trying to make was that for the one who loads one picture with an idea, there are 649 other pictures that will be made by 649 other writers who will have an entirely different viewpoint and they will offset each other. (*Applause.*)

*Mr. Denny:* Mr. Crisp, do you want to get in on this?

*Mr. Crisp:* Mr. Riskin has said "Should Hollywood make pictures"—period. Should we suddenly switch from that, from entertainment to evangelism? If we had Jesus, Moses, Buddha, Confucius, someone, Abraham Lincoln, then perhaps we might turn over and say "Yes, you're the man that can tell us what to make." But so far I love the people of Hollywood, but I know no one with great enough mind to tell us that much.

*Mr. Denny:* Thank you, very much, Mr. Crisp. While you and Mr. Riskin prepare your summaries for this evening's discussion, I want to thank the members of our Los Angeles Town Meeting host committee, the moderators who are members of the American Veterans' Committee, and the representatives of the American Broadcasting Company for their mag-

nificent cooperation on this and all of our West Coast originations.

We leave tomorrow for the East and the program next week will originate at the Taft Auditorium in Cincinnati, Ohio, where our subject will be "Should We Continue the Draft for at Least Two Years?" Our speakers will be Senator Harold Burton of Ohio; and Baukhage, the well-known American network commentator, who will speak for the affirmative; Congressman Clarence J. Brown of Ohio, and a fourth speaker to be announced, for the negative.

Now we have a final word on tonight's discussion from Mr. Riskin and Mr. Crisp. We hear the summary for the negative first by Mr. Crisp. Mr. Crisp, one minute, please.

*Mr. Crisp:* Most of the present restrictions on the screen are to preserve decency, but if films started promoting particular political, social, and economic ideologies, as Mr. Riskin advocates, pictures would see a flood of censorship beyond our wildest fears. No producer will show both sides of any question. He'll picturize the viewpoint he wants to sell to the public, and, if he believes it hard enough, he's willing to lose money to get his point over.

The thing is—you pay your money to see the picture. You should see it without anything being forced down your throat. You should have entertainment—enter-

tainment 100 per cent. That's what you paid for. (*Applause.*)

*Mr. Denny:* Thank you, Donald Crips. Now a final word for the affirmative by Robert Riskin.

*Mr. Riskin:* We feel that our worthy opponents failed to make a case for their side of the discussion, that Hollywood should not make pictures designed to influence public opinion, and that the only possible way they could have done so would have been to subscribe to the notion that freedom of expression be entirely eradicated from our way of life. Obviously they do not seek this, as no honest and right-thinking person does.

We, Miss Bennett and I, continue in the firm belief that the public is entitled to be kept informed on matters of current interest through every possible means of communication. Failure on the part of Hollywood to treat with the problems which torture the world would be equivalent to debasing itself artistically and would represent an unforgivable disregard for their obligation to the public. (*Applause.*)

*Mr. Denny:* Thank you, Mr. Riskin, Mr. Crisp, Mr. McGinnis, and Miss Bennett, for opening the door for us to a very important question. And now here's an important message for you.

*Announcer:* Not long ago in New York a red-headed marine corporal returned to visit his former school. He had just come

back from the South Pacific with a Purple Heart and a Presidential Unit Citation. When the school superintendent introduced him as a former pupil, the boys sang "The Halls of Montezuma" with a fervor that shook the auditorium. As the assembly hall finally quieted down, he said, "I don't deserve all that praise. It should go to the schools and teachers who've made men of us."

An article in a recent issue of *The Reader's Digest* revealed how schools and school teachers are bringing out the best in all boys and girls. Yet this September about a million high school age boys and girls may not return to school unless they are firmly convinced that lack of proper schooling constitutes a serious threat, not only to their own futures, but to the future of the Nation as well.

Now, more than ever before, our young people need a good education. Their place in peacetime

America is not in the factories or on the farms but in the schools. To maintain a permanent peace and to build a better world, will call for the best efforts of able, well-educated men and women.

Teen-age children must plan to continue their schooling. By doing so, they will enjoy valuable experiences that will make them more useful citizens, give them a better understanding of the world, and develop their qualities of leadership. They will have opportunity for better health through school sports and physical training and they will be better equipped through education to hold good jobs in later years.

If you are between 14 and 17 years old, for your own sake, you should make every possible effort to return to school this fall.

Be sure to tune in next week when *The Reader's Digest* brings you Town Meeting.



Reg. U.S. Pat. Off.

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